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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 NICOSIA 000651

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SUBJECT: TALAT FINALLY BLINKS; DEMINING TO RESTART IN CYPRUS

Classified By: Ambassador Ronald L. Schlicher, Reasons 1.4 (b), (d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: European Commission and UN Development Program officials July 30 signed an agreement that allows humanitarian demining activities in the Cypriot Buffer Zone to continue, hopefully to their conclusion. Financing for operations, approximately four million euro, will come from the European Union's 259 million euro assistance package for the Turkish Cypriot community. The agreement ended a lengthy, acrimonious impasse that had threatened the EU-led demining mission which, along with Committee for Missing Persons, represents one of the few Cyprus Problem-related bright spots of recent years. In backbriefs with Embassy personnel, UNFICYP officials recounted tough negotiations to break the logjam, with the UN and EU arrayed against T/C leadership and the local Turkish Forces command; only the international side's brinkmanship convinced Turkish Cypriot leader Mehmet Ali Talat to drop opposition to utilizing the four million -- "money the EU had intended solely to benefit the T/C community" -- for the bi-communal project. Deminers, who were to depart Cyprus the week of August 6, instead will deploy to "unowned" (by neither the Greek Cypriot National Guard nor the Turkish Forces/Turkish Cypriot Forces) minefields and commence preparatory work immediately. Meanwhile, UNFICYP will continue efforts to negotiate a protocol extension with the TF/TCF to allow remediation of Turkish-lain minefields in the Buffer Zone. While hesitant to read too much into Talat's about-face on the four million, we nonetheless hope the move signifies a renewed willingness to move forward and make "sacrifices" that benefit both Cypriot communities. END SUMMARY.

Minefields a Vivid Reminder of Unresolved Conflict

¶2. (U) Minefields dot and abut the 120-mile-long Buffer Zone that divides Cyprus east to west, planted by both Greek Cypriot and Turkish/Turkish Cypriot forces. In its most-recent (2006) country report, the influential journal "Landmine Monitor" (icbl.org/lm) published historical UNFICYP statistics that revealed 101 mined areas on the island at the cease-fire of hostilities in August 1974, 53 within the BZ. Two mine action centers currently operate on Cyprus. One functions under the command of the GCNG Engineer Corps, and has responsibility both for clearing fields outside the Buffer Zone and for implementing Cypriot obligations under the international Mine Ban Treaty.

¶3. (U) Demining within the Buffer Zone falls under the supervision of the Mine Action Center in Cyprus (MAC-C), founded in 2004. MAC-C is part of the EU's Partnership for the Future Program (PFF) and is implemented by UNDP. In 2004, the European Commission allocated four million euro to

fund land mine removal and later added another million. MAC-C operations commenced in late 2004 with the clearance of a dozen GCNG-lain fields; its successes allowed the opening of the BZ crossing point at Astromeritis/Bostanci, 40 miles west of Nicosia. After UNFICYP inked an accord with the TF, MAC-C commenced demining Turkish-lain fields in August 2005, concentrating in and around the capital. UNFICYP declared the Nicosia vicinity mine-free in a widely-attended ceremony in November 2006. According to MAC-C Project Manager Michael Raine, as of August 2007 his teams had cleared a total of 25 fields and 2.2 million square meters of terrain.

This Money's Not Bicommunal

¶4. (C) Along with the UN Committee for Missing Persons -- which last month began returning to families the remains of individuals going missing during the span of the Cyprus conflict -- we can think of few bicommunal initiatives enjoying greater success than demining. Despite this, the program faced a terminal threat from funding shortfalls in late 2006. Its operations having drawn down the European Commission's initial allotment, MAC-C halted minefield clearance in January 2007 and demobilized most of its sappers, retaining only limited staff to respond to priority tasks such as unexploded ordnance (UXO) inspection/remediation work at the proposed Ledra Street BZ crossing. Local EU and UN officials believed they had found a solution, however, after winning Brussels's approval to utilize for demining four million of the 259 million euro assistance package for Turkish Cypriots.

¶5. (C) Talat was not buying, however. Brussels intended the long-delayed direct aid package to benefit the T/C community

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solely, he protested; the money should not fund bicommunal programs like demining. Sensing most Turkish Cypriots felt similarly, he went public with his complaints. EU member state diplomats we consulted claimed that Talat had dubious legal or procedural grounds to dictate or prohibit discrete disbursements from the 259m fund. Nonetheless, a donor body that functions on consensus and harmony plainly was hamstrung by its obstinate recipient, and the proposed four million euro transfer sat. Subsequent hard lobbying by UNFICYP staff, local EU personnel, the European Commission, and even UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon proved incapable of budging Talat an inch.

A Change Afoot

¶6. (C) There had seemed little cause for optimism when, on July 27, UNFICYP chief Michael Moller telephoned the Ambassador with good news. That morning, Talat had notified Moller that, "after deep consideration," he had agreed the EU could fund demining ops from the EU-T/C aid package. UN military leaders were rushing to conclude arrangements with local TF commanders to allow activities to commence, Moller revealed, hoping the Turks would erect no further roadblocks.

¶7. (U) UNDP and PFF signed an accord on July 30, elements of which broke publicly two days later. According to media accounts, the additional four million euro would allow the completion of demining activities in the BZ. UNFICYP welcomed the arrangement in an optimistically-worded press release. "We commend the ongoing financial support provided by the European Commission to continue the important task of rendering the Buffer Zone free of all mines and ultimately returning the land to civilian use," the communication read.

Finger of Blame Brings Change of Heart

¶8. (C) "This was not the generals here backing off, but rather a political decision from Ankara," deduced UNFICYP DCM Wlodek Cibor August 1. Uncertain what had driven the change, Cibor surmised that the AKP's big victory July 22 might have given Turkish PM Erdogan some wiggle room to allow Talat more flexibility. Some uncharacteristic EU and UN brinkmanship also had played a great part, however. At the highest levels, European Union officials had pressed Turkey and the Turkish Cypriots that, should Talat not accept the funding transfer, the deminers would close shop completely, an embarrassing development. On the UN track, UNFICYP elevated the issue to Assistant SYG for Peacekeeping Operations Hedi Annabi's level. Annabi recently summoned Turkish Permanent Representative Baki Ilkin to discuss demining, Cibor continued. "Should the program be suspended, there would be far-reaching consequences, and the UN would be forced to publicly lay blame on the Turkish side" headlined Annabi's message. Ilkin initially responded by pleading for more time; evidently, his subsequent report to bosses in Ankara underpinned the eventual about-face.

¶9. (C) The majority of remaining minefields in the Buffer Zone belonged to the TF/TCF, Cibor noted. Yet MAC-C attention to these fields could not commence until UNFICYP secured extension of the governing protocol from local commanders. He did not expect an easy negotiation. While UNFICYP's mandate in the BZ as laid out in its 1989 aide memoire lay in returning property to its original use, the Turkish side believed this departure from the status quo potentially hazardous. They pointed to repeated incidents of Greek Cypriots "provocatively" farming their plots in the zone north of UNFICYP's own "Farming Security Line," actions that had sometimes sparked confrontations. Nonetheless, UNFICYP was not about to backtrack its mandate, Cibor argued. Despite worries of a tough fight, he thought the sides eventually would reach agreement.

¶10. (C) Meanwhile, MAC-C experts would begin preparatory work on remediating the six or seven "unowned" BZ minefields. Three lay close to the G/C cease-fire lines; they would receive attention first. UNFICYP intended to alert the Turkish side of the work; there was no legal/procedural necessity to seek the TF's express clearance, but Cibor expected to receive protests nonetheless. MAC-C chief Raine asserted that his Mozambican sappers would deploy en masse the moment that UNFICYP landed the agreement with the Turkish side.

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Sign of Better Times Ahead?

¶11. (C) COMMENT: Talat's latest tirade over demining funding, thankfully OBE'd, was but one of a series of tantrums that have left us wondering where the grownups went in northern Cyprus. His ungrateful behavior towards benefactors and allies in Brussels appeared particularly egregious and self-damaging, however. Still miffed over the European Union's inability to pass a direct trade regulation owing to Greek Cypriot opposition, Talat has chosen to view the direct aid package -- at 1000 euro per capita, generous beyond belief -- as the booby prize, the "least the EU could do." And by attempting to dictate what Brussels could and could not fund, he showed a not unexpected naivete of how real countries do assistance (mostly, Turkey just signs checks). The optimists hope Talat has realized that western aid comes with strings attached, and that intransigence and bluster won't buy him scissors. More broadly, we hope this too-long-delayed but sensible turn on demining presages his abandonment of at least some of the self-defeating obstructionism he has displayed over the prior eight months.
SCHLICHER